

Resourcing Future Directions and Our Mission

How we envision being a contemporary, courageous and growing church through our use of property

Summary

The purpose of this paper is to begin to set out the Church's shared understandings about the responsibilities and benefits regarding property owned by the Uniting Church in Australia to help lead us toward a vision of property being the "common wealth" of the Uniting Church for the mission of God through the whole church.

It draws on material in the 2015 issue of *Insights - Property for a Pilgrim People – Mission and Property* and the SYNOD's 2021 **Future Directions** Documents, and in particular the **Future Directions Synod Resourcing Framework**.

Property for a Pilgrim People – Mission and Property looks at the Biblical perspectives on property and how these might relate to the Church's use of property in current times, as well as providing some useful definitions of property related terminology. This notes the tensions and changes in the use of property and draws the conclusions that key principles are that property does not exist for the benefit of an individual or group but should be used principally for the purpose of the Church's mission with an underlying principle of equality of benefit.

The **Future Directions Synod Resourcing Framework** is about providing resources for this focus on mission across the whole Church. Property resources are the common wealth of the Uniting Church for the mission of God through the whole Church. It sets out an overall approach across our Congregations, Presbyteries and Synod for resourcing mission into the future, particularly the future directions approved by Synod. Key to this are five guiding principles:

The Church's Resources should be managed to:

- enable the Church to do what we have been called;
- achieve more for the Church at mission ;
- support the flourishing of healthy Congregations, the development of vital ministry, and engagement with the community in transformative ways;
- be used for the common good of the Church and enable the whole of the Church to be greater than the sum of its parts; and
- be managed where the ministry or project is happening, if there is capacity to manage it effectively.

To go forward we need congregations to look at their place and future within the overall picture of the whole Uniting Church. This can be considered in terms of their individual mission plans and in relation to the Presbytery and Synod mission plans.

We want to grow in how we use property resources as the common wealth of the Uniting Church for the mission of God through the whole Church.

Introduction

Our NSW/ACT Synod recently approved a Future Directions plan¹ through which it is leading our Presbyteries, Congregations and Synod entities to focus in mission on enabling the growth of the Church's witness to Jesus Christ through:

- rural and regional ministry;
- ministry to young people;
- walking together with First Peoples;
- active stewardship of the Earth including climate justice and
- renewal of discipleship in and through congregations.

A Future Directions Synod Resourcing Framework² has also been designed to provide principles for us to follow. This framework includes an acknowledgement of four key resources that support the work of the Uniting Church: people, programs, financial assets and property. This paper is focused on only one of these – property. It aims to set out a shared understanding about property and to help lead us toward a vision of property being the common wealth of the Uniting Church for the mission of God through the whole church.

Canberra Region Presbytery is about to embark on its own mission planning, and this will be built upon consultation with congregations. Congregations will be in various stages of the life cycles of their own mission plans. As background to this, congregations and Presbytery are encouraged to consider the best use of their property and cash resources for the mission of God.

Throughout our Presbytery there are different understandings of the responsibilities and benefits regarding property owned by the Uniting Church in Australia. This property includes the buildings we gather in for worship and through which we serve our local communities, the residences for our ministers and pastors, and property we rent or lease out to earn revenue to pay for the costs of buildings and mission. Our different understandings can lead to confusion and difficulties when Presbytery or Synod become involved in decisions about property.

Property for a Pilgrim People, Mission and Property

What does the Bible have to say about property?³ The Old Testament has much to say about property but in quite a different context to the world experienced in 21st century Australia. The laws governing property and debt, debt forgiveness and land tenure as expressed in the Sabbath and Jubilee year laws were about ensuring that property did not end up in the hands of a few. There were also laws that mandated the support of the temple and those who ministered there.

In the biblical tradition there is also tension, if not a conflict, over whether or not it was appropriate to build a temple for the worship of God. In the world of Abraham and Sarah and

¹ <https://nswact.uca.org.au/media/9996/future-directions-for-the-people-of-god-on-the-way.pdf>

² : <https://nswact.uca.org.au/media/10467/synod-2021-future-directions-synod-resourcing-framework-august.pdf>

³ https://issuu.com/insightsmagazine/docs/propertyforapilgrimpeople-mission_p

their offspring there were sacred places but no temples or buildings of that nature. Solomon built a temple and for the next 1000 years the temple was at the heart of religious life.

By the time of the New Testament, synagogues had come into being as centres of gathering and learning. Quite probably these were multifunctional buildings that served both secular and religious purposes – a cross between a town hall and a place of worship. They probably served as banqueting halls, as places of refuge and courts of law among other things. The synagogue served as the centre of the cultural and religious life supported by the whole community where culture and religion were inextricably bound together.

Jesus and the apostles would frequent synagogues and engage in the activities, discussions and debates but it would seem that the Church, as it developed, had no property for the purpose of gathering and worship. In Acts 4 individuals sold property for the leaders in the church to distribute to the needy. One can conclude that the emphasis was in sharing the resources for the benefit of others.

Later we see Paul collecting money from the Churches established in other parts of the Roman Empire to support the struggling Church in Jerusalem afflicted with persecution and famine. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul writes that the reason for giving is about “equality” - clearly he believed rich Churches should support poorer ones.

In terms of how Church property is used, the Bible does not really provide specific or consistent instruction or examples that are relevant to the circumstances of the Church in our time and place. However, that does not mean we cannot deduce some principles that help us reflect on what might be appropriate.

The Old Testament law of Jubilee required that after 50 years all agricultural land be returned to the original owner without compensation. This does not provide a model but suggests a principle that might be applied to Church property which does not exist only for the benefit of one person or group of people

If the Church is to follow in the way of Jesus, living by His mission statement, we would expect the resources we have to be used in preaching of “...Good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18- 19). Here there is an allusion to the year of Jubilee – the universal release of people and property from the burdens of the past.

The mission of Jesus is essentially about transforming society, reconciliation and renewal. Synod’s 2021 Future Directions documents have been prepared to focus on renewal and to assist us to address the key question: How will we collectively and creatively deploy the Church’s assets to serve the mission of God?

The Uniting Church’s document, Property for a Pilgrim People, includes some relevant property terminology to assist in considering the different roles that Synod, Presbyteries and individual congregations have in their shared responsibility for property.

Property – means property of whatsoever nature whether real or personal, and includes money, investments, and rights relating to property [Reg 4.1].

Ownership - In its usual understanding means that a person or entity has exclusive right to property and may determine how to use and deal with it (noting legislative capacity to limit rights of ownership). The Uniting Church as a whole owns all Uniting Church property through two property trusts. All Councils of the Church have an interest in the property held by the Uniting Church:

1. The Congregation has beneficial use (noting, other bodies may also have such use)
2. Presbytery has to ensure property resources are being used and maintained appropriately for mission
3. Synod administers and sets policy for property assets within the bounds of The Synod held by the Property Trust on behalf of the whole Church
4. Assembly provides “for the control and management of the property and funds vested in the Church” [UCA Constitution, Division 3 Part D]

All Councils of the Church have a responsibility in relation to property but none have exclusive rights

Stewardship - The joint responsibility to use resources for the Mission of the Church, representing a greater responsibility than simply the preservation of capital or good maintenance of property assets

Beneficial Users - This is a term that has come into common usage in the Church that acknowledges a right and responsibility that must be recognised but which is not ownership. A Congregation has beneficial use of property owned by the Uniting Church as a whole. It has the benefit of the use of all “property of the Church acquired or held for the use of the Congregation” and the Church Council has the responsibility of management and administration of it [Reg 4.4.1]. The same principle applies in relation to other councils or bodies [Reg 4.5.1].

Common wealth - all the resources of the Church within the bounds of The Synod.

The predominant expectation has been that property is solely for the benefit of the Congregation that has beneficial use of it. The Church recognises that there is a need for another approach. Such an approach would recognise a common wealth of resources available for the mission of the Church more broadly mostly for the benefit of the local mission but not necessarily in the locality or context of the property. The beneficial ownership of all property whether real or personal is vested in the whole Uniting Church in Australia [UCA Constitution, Clause 50]. It has been noted that the Sydney property market has delivered huge gains in value for property in the metropolitan areas, not replicated in regional or rural centres. A common wealth approach would require a change in a way of thinking from it is “mine” to it is “our collective responsibility to discern and use what belongs to God for the good of all.” Conversely it cannot be seen as a “grab” by those who have not from those who have but an opportunity for there to be a corporate discerning as to where resources that belong to all may best be deployed for the overall mission of the Church.

Future Directions Synod Resourcing Framework 2021

This framework proposes that ‘the Church commits to sharing and using our resources to strengthen the Church’s commitment to the mission of God, as a whole and as individual

congregations, to enable us to continue to bear our unique and transformative witness of the gospel’.

We are called as disciples of Christ to feed the hungry, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. As Jesus’ disciples were commissioned to go and make disciples of all people, so are we. The early church provides an example of disciples sharing their possessions for the benefit of the whole community, fulfilling Christ’s calling to care for those in need. We do not do this in our own strength. The Holy Spirit strengthens us to be generous.

As we grow our witness to Jesus Christ through Future Directions, we also remember the faithfulness of the generations who went before us who determined, like the disciples in the early church, that our property should benefit the whole church and not any single entity.

Resourcing decisions will be based on five resourcing principles:

1. **Delivery of mission:** Resourcing should enable the Church to do what we have been called, in the words of the Basis of Union, to do: to be “an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself”;
2. **Achieve more:** The Church’s resources should ‘work harder’ and achieve more for the Church at mission. That is, the responsible entity – Synod, Presbytery, Congregation, or board - should actively and strategically steward their resources and consider the best use of their resources for the Church’s mission and ministry;
3. **Seek energy:** Resources should support the flourishing of healthy Congregations, the development of vital ministry, and engagement with the community in transformative ways. Resources should be moved from where there is no energy to do things to where there is energy;
4. **Whole of Church:** Our resources should be used for the common good of the Church and enable the whole of the Church to be greater than the sum of its parts. We should consider how our resources can help the wider Church achieve its mission and ministry activities across NSW and the ACT, and across different generations;
5. **Inter-conciliar and collaborative processes:** Congregations, Presbyteries, the Synod and agencies will work together to define tasks and responsibilities, with the polity of the Church guiding project plans, leadership and decision making. Resources should be managed where the ministry or project is happening, if there is capacity to manage it effectively.⁴

The Future Directions Synod Resourcing Framework is about providing resources for mission across the whole Church. Property resources are the common wealth of the Uniting Church for the mission of God through the whole Church. Different parts of the Church will play different roles in progressing resourcing decisions. Congregations and Presbyteries will identify Future Directions projects locally and how the congregation’s resources can be shared to resource the Future Direction of the Synod. Synod will be responsible for overseeing Future Directions priorities and the liberation of resources to enable implementation of the priorities. It will also manage the day-to-day implementation of the resourcing process and decisions, and support Presbyteries and Congregations with expertise in people, program, financial and property management and development. Further details about the roles of Uniting Mission & Education,

⁴ Ibid; pp.8-9

the Property Board, Uniting Financial Services Board and the Uniting Board can be found in the Framework document.

Next steps

It has been acknowledged that ideas about sharing resources are probably challenging to many Presbyteries, Congregations and Synod entities. Some may believe that if they built up resources in the past, they should hold on to them for ever. Where two congregations amalgamate, they often like to keep both buildings so they can alternate services between the two churches and rent out the second manse to provide enough income to support a full-time minister. But is this the best way to support our mission objectives? In some cases across the Synod we have slowly declining congregations with a handful of members having beneficial ownership of large and valuable property resources. While in other places there are vibrant growing missional congregations needing more resources to support the growth, but not having access to the same kind of valuable property to enable that growth.

Our Presbytery has previously identified in its own Future Directions 2018-2021 document the importance of encouraging congregations that are experiencing growth to build their potential and capacity to expand their mission as well as caring for fragile congregations to assist with difficult decisions. The Synod, Presbytery and Congregations already have a track record of using cash and property resources to support the overall mission of the whole Uniting Church. Some examples where financial contributions from these parts of the Uniting Church assisted mission in the wider church through building programmes include: Greenhills, Weston Creek Uniting Church and Gungahlin Uniting Church. You may have stories of other ways we have worked together for the mission of God through the whole Uniting Church.

Our Presbytery is encouraging congregations to look at their place and future within the overall picture of the whole Uniting Church. This can be considered in terms of individual mission plans and in relation to the Presbytery and Synod mission plans. It is important for Church Councils to familiarise themselves with the documents used as the basis for this paper (see links on page 1).

These documents identify the Synod's commitment to prioritising the following areas for mission across the Church:

- Rural and regional ministry
- Ministry with people in the first third of life
- Walking together with First Peoples and our covenant with Congress
- An active stewardship of the earth
- Working with Presbyteries to organise ourselves to promote growth within and through our Congregations

We want to grow in how we use property resources as the common wealth of the Uniting Church for the mission of God through the whole Church.